

**Senate Select Committee on School Safety Hearing on  
“Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity Discrimination and School Safety”  
Plummer Park- Fiesta Hall, West Hollywood  
October 3, 2002**

**Testimony of Nikira Hernandez**

My name is Nikira Hernandez, I'm a junior at Santa Cruz High School. In the ninth grade I came out as a lesbian.

I have empowered myself by refusing to be a passive victim of homophobia. My school is very tolerant because we have worked to make it that way. I have worked with my school's gay-straight alliance to do a lot of peer education, which involves students going into classrooms and presenting information on homophobia, the ways in which it manifests itself and how those need to be changed. We give basic statistics, like four out of five lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered students report verbal, sexual, or physical harassment at school. This alerts students to the fact that harassment is indeed an issue. Definitions and clarifications are also given, including how to intervene if they notice harassment around them. Peer education creates awareness surrounding LGBT issues. Peer pressure shapes much of the behavior of students in high school, so when information is being given peer to peer saying that homophobia is not okay, it really affects students.

Students are working very hard to change the climate of their schools. This work is extremely important, but the students should not bear this burden alone. It is the administration's responsibility to enforce anti harassment policies and make schools a safe place for everyone.

Teachers are also a vital link in stopping harassment in schools. They are given the opportunity to stop harassment on a day to day basis. Most teachers are more than willing to do this, but they don't because they simply don't know how. Given the tools to prevent harassment against LGBT youth, teachers could do so much to create a positive, supportive environment.

When I was struggling with the acceptance of my identity, it was my teachers who gave me the courage to eventually come out. They did this by confronting homophobia. On the first day of school one of my teachers stopped a boy mid sentence and reprimanded him for using a slur. This immediately set the tone for a supportive, positive environment by shutting down homophobic acts before they really had a chance to start. My teachers comment went a long way in helping me come to terms with who I am because I knew that it would be safe to be myself in that class. The teaching staff of Santa Cruz High is able to be this supportive because we have had teacher sensitivity trainings to give them the knowledge and the tools to do so.

Other teachers have gone out of their way to put up gay friendly posters on the doors and walls of their rooms. This also sends a message of support and shuts down potential homophobic acts before they happen. Posters are a simple and effective way of setting the tone for a safe environment and would be easy to distribute on a large scale.

These are just a few examples of things that Santa Cruz High has done to create a positive learning environment in which I can feel empowered and safe. It is my hope that other schools will follow our example in setting the tone for a supportive learning atmosphere, rather than simply reacting to incidents of harassment. We need preventative programs to stop this pattern of harassment and ensure safer schools for all.